

Ship's Crew Mobil

By JO1 Linda Pepka,
USS Emory S. Land Public Affairs
Photos by PHAN Wes Marquis

When a brush fire broke out on the western side of the Mediterranean island where USS *Emory S. Land* (AS 39) is homeported, her crew mobilized to save their ship. They also fought to save the ship's port-support installation and the rest of the eastern part of Sardinia's Santo Stefano Island, all of which were threatened.

It was late afternoon on a hot day when the first bits of ash and smoke trickled over the hilltop onto the ship's decks. Shipboard activity suddenly ceased for the crew members still aboard or near the ship, because a call for action soon came. ET1(SS) Mark Oliver and ET2(SS) Grant Gildehaus were taking a



USS *Emory S. Land* (AS 39) firefighters hose down the area to keep the fire from spreading. In the upper left portion of the picture can be seen Sailors wetting the roof of one of the buildings aboard the naval facility where the ship is moored in Sardinia.



Smoke bellows over USS *Emory S. Land's* (AS 39) stern during a brush fire in Santo Stefano Island, Sardinia, where the submarine tender is homeported. The ship's crew was instrumental in keeping the brush fire from spreading from the western part of the island to the facility where the ship was moored.

break at the recreation center and were two of the first to respond and man hoses.

"I had seen evidence of controlled burning in Palau and thought that's what was occurring when I saw the smoke, ash and flames," said Petty Officer Oliver. "But when I saw teams of firefighters running to man hoses, I knew this wasn't something planned."

One of the ship's officers quickly organized the first hose teams to arrive on the scene, then coordinated lengthening hoses on demand so fire teams could advance and beat back the fire. Shortly thereafter, the ship's damage-control team coordinated other damage-control efforts, such as overhauling hot spots. There was also the logistical challenge of coordinating the rigging of hoses from the ship and

lizes to Fight Fire

from two Navy tugboats assisting in the firefighting, then spreading the hoses over and around buildings.

“There was at least a half-mile of territory we needed to defend from the flames,” said Capt. David Volonino, the submarine tender’s commanding officer. “One of the initial problems was how to get enough sources of water and a sufficient number of hoses out there to stop the rapidly spreading fire. Our first order was to establish ten hose teams; we eventually had thirteen hose teams fighting the fire.”

The ship also deployed a brush team that raced by truck to the island summit to establish a firebreak between advancing flames and the island’s eastern side.

Capt. Volonino and *Emory S. Land*’s XO, Cdr. Jack Gustafson, coordinated firefighting efforts from the ship’s brow, using VHF radios and cellular phones. Having an overall view of the blaze, they communicated directly with numerous on-scene



BM2 Otelto Rodrigues from the submarine tender’s deck department was the nozzle-man for a team of Sailors who kept the brush on the eastern side of the island moist enough to keep the fire from spreading.



The island has no firefighting department, so Italian water-carrying, military helicopters assisted the Sailors in containing the fire to the western side of the island and away from the naval facility.

leaders, guiding them to wet down a perimeter 220 yards from the site. As fire drew nearer, they guided firefighters who were beating back advancing flames.

“Many of the firefighters wanted to charge up the hill and attack the flames directly. I had to keep pulling the teams back *[communicating over the VHF radios]*” said the XO. “My fear was that, due to the strong winds that were veering about ninety to a hundred degrees, there was a possibility hose teams were getting too far ahead of adjacent teams and thus might get cut off by pockets of flames behind them. Defending against a half-mile-long wall of flame required a half-mile-long wall of water.”

Command Master Chief Joel Allison said more than 5,000 feet of ship’s hoses were used to combat



In the surrealistic photo above, ash from burning brush rains upon an *Emory S. Land* (AS 39) Sailor who was one of the dozens who helped to keep the brush fire from spreading and threatening the naval facility and the ship. Below, Sailors man a two-and-a-half-inch hose as they prepare to hose down brush to keep it from catching fire.



the fire, including one series of 26 hoses, each 50 feet long, that extended 1,300 feet. Even with that length, *Emory S. Land*'s fire pumps maintained enough pressure to shoot water 50 feet.

The ship's crew also scurried to remove hazmat from storage areas near the fence line. Ladders were positioned to allow rooftop access for the firefighters. A medical-support team on the pier in front of the port facility's recreation center treated smoke-inhalation or heat-stress victims, and the team monitored hydration levels. Fortunately, no one was killed or injured.

"Once we were confident we were in control of the fire, we allowed firefighting teams to travel near the top of the ridgeline," said the CO. "The firefighting team that went over the ridge to the western side of the island put out all the hot spots and brush fires, then came across the crest of the hill to help extinguish [fires] on the eastern side," added the XO.

According to Capt. Volonino, the team's efforts helped reestablish the firebreak that initially had cut off the military section from the main island. Vegetation on the island's eastern side was sparser than on the western side. Had the flames continued to advance, they would have been sufficiently less intense and 13 hoses could have beat them, noted the captain.

Defending against a half-mile-long wall of flame required a half-mile-long wall of water.

Although Santo Stefano Island has no fire department, Italian water-carrying helicopters rendered vital assistance during the fire.

Among that day's scores of unsung heroes were those Sailors who hauled "mountains" of material to the scene, including hoses, fire extinguishers, overhaul gear, and cases of bottled water to hydrate and cool firefighters.

"I do not have the words to describe how proud I am of them," said Capt. Volonino. "Together, the crew of *Emory S. Land*—along with Sailors from USS *Providence* and from the Naval Support Activity La Maddalena—demonstrated courage, strength, teamwork, and the value of proper damage-control training." 🙏